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SUBJECT: SERBIA: IRF RELEASE PROMPTS COMPARISON, CRITICISM

REF: STATE 99226

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) The release of the 2008 International Religious Freedom (IRF) report (reftel) drew a strong response from the Serbian Ministry of Religion and in the press. While expressing dissatisfaction regarding the report's conclusions about the discriminatory nature of the Serbian religion law, commentators were particularly critical of the characterization of the state of religious freedom in Serbia relative to its neighbors. Press reports cast aspersions on the assessment of the situation in Kosovo, with some outlets alleging that the report ignored violations of religious freedom in Kosovo in order to justify U.S. support for independence. End Summary.

MFA: FURTHER STUDY NEEDED

2. (U) On September 22, PolOff delivered a copy of the IRF report to MFA North America Division Head Srdjan Miljkovic, as well as to Assistant Religion Minister Dragan Novakovic and his advisor for international relations Aleksandar Rakovic.

3. (U) Miljkovic thanked us for passing on a copy of the IRF so soon after its release. He said that he would provide comments once he studied the report.

MINISTRY OF RELIGION: WE WERE READY YESTERDAY

4. (U) In contrast, Novakovic and Rakovic clearly were aware of the report's release and its content as they were prepared to provide immediate feedback. Rakovic also had read at least the summary of the reports for all of the neighboring countries.

5. (U) Novakovic emphasized that the GOS supports freedom of religion and that there is a "stable situation" between religious communities in Serbia. He said that it is important to realize that there has been a "change in consciousness" regarding religion, referring to the Yugoslav period. He also characterized the 2006 religion law as a "transitional law" and mentioned that the goal would be to put together an expert commission to look into changing or amending the law; he did not mention a specific timeframe.

6. (U) Novakovic and Rakovic expressed two specific criticisms of the report for Serbia:

--- The report focuses on "two percent of the population" (referring to the minority religious communities that have experienced problems with registration);

--- The word "discrimination" is not used in reference to the situation in Kosovo, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, or Macedonia, which is not acceptable to Serbia.

¶7. (U) PolOff responded that he could not comment on the other reports but pointed out that we take issue with the law and its application, not the GOS per se. (Note: The Serbian report states that "the law places limits on religious practice by discriminating among religious groups and denies some groups legal status." End note.)

¶8. (SBU) Perhaps in attempt to back up its words with action, the Ministry on September 24 issued a press statement denouncing a graffiti attack on the Christian Adventist house of worship in Sivac during the night of September 19. Human rights organizations such as the Center for Development of Civil Society welcomed the strongly-worded statement, in which the Ministry also confirmed its determination to undertake long-term measures to eradicate signs of religious intolerance and to overcome religious prejudices.

MEDIA REACTION: FROM TAME TO INFLAMED

¶9. (U) The first reports on the IRF report in the Serbian press focused mostly on its release. The daily "Blic," the Beta news agency, and B-92 television ran stories that gave factual accounts of the main conclusions of the reports for Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

¶10. (U) The tone of coverage then changed drastically, stoked in part by commentary from the Ministry of Religion. Articles in the nationalist tabloid "Kurir" and the Novi Sad-based daily "Dnevnik" mentioned the Ministry's objections to the Serbian report but gave greater emphasis to alleged omissions in the report for Kosovo.

¶11. (U) The report in "Dnevnik," accompanied by a photo of a destroyed monastery captioned "Kosovar example of religious

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freedom," contained a statement by Rakovic that the Serbian people and clergy in Kosovo face "constant ethnic and religious discrimination," not "pressure from a bunch of rowdy underaged looters," which is how he characterized the conclusions in the IRF report.

¶12. (U) The "Kurir" article, entitled "Americans 'Embellish' Pristina," went a step further, alleging that the State Department doctored the report for Kosovo in order to justify Kosovo's "secession." In support of this conclusion, the article quoted Dusan Janjic, head of the Forum for Ethnic Relations, who stated that the reports for Serbia and Montenegro were objective but argued that the Kosovo report sought to justify the creation of an independent state in Kosovo by painting an exceedingly rosy picture.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Serbian reaction to the release of the IRF, and the fixation on the Kosovo portion, demonstrates the depth of emotional attachment to its former province. However, as with Serbia's initiative to seek an advisory opinion on Kosovo's independence from the International Court of Justice, this approach threatens to detract attention from other issues at hand. In the case of religious freedom in Serbia, this means less time spent focusing on how to reform the discriminatory 2006 religion law. End Comment.

MUNTER